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Facelifts move fast for two WKU facilities Snell Hall almost finished; Van Meter Hall Auditorium is months ahead of schedule

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The sound of hammers at Western Kentucky University will soon be coming to a halt – at least on two major projects nearing completion.

Officials said the new Snell Hall will be open in July, while Van Meter Hall Auditorium is five months ahead of schedule and should be ready for performances in Spring 2010.

Kerra Ogden, WKU's project manager for the Van Meter renovation, said the steel construction of the new stage house that sits behind the stage was nearing completion over the past week.

When it is completed, the building – which hasn't seen a major renovation since 1911 – will have undergone a hefty "facelift," Ogden said.

Part of the improvements to the building include an enhanced sight line for the audience, as a new floor has been poured and new seating rearranged to allow for optimal viewing.

David Lee, dean of the Potter College of Arts & Letters, said to those familiar with the auditorium, one of the most noticeable changes will be the removal of the center aisle.

"We reconfigured the seating plan and sight plan because if you think about it, the center aisle takes up the best seats," Lee said.

Lee said many officials are excited about the addition of the "Four Seasons" statues, formerly located in a courtyard outside the old Snell Hall, that will be housed in niches in the building.

"What's significant is that Van Meter is one of the signature buildings of campus," Lee said. "It's certainly a building that when you think of WKU, you think of Van Meter ... the quality of any production will be significantly better than what folks have seen in Van Meter in a long, long time."

Part of that improvement can be attributed to the enhanced acoustics and audio system as well as the new stage lighting for performances, Lee said.

The new stage house is being constructed to give performers additional space to prepare backstage while also providing more room for curtains and drop sets.

The added space will allow for larger performances, Lee said, which would accommodate shows with an orchestra and choir.

"The theater and dance and especially music (departments) needed a better place to perform and this will be a big step for those folks," Lee said.

With the new addition also comes a small "VIP" room for pre- or post-production meetings.

"Typically when you bring someone to campus to give a performance or presentation in the evening, there will also be group time for them with students or faculty before they go down for the main show," Lee said. "This will give them the place for that to happen."

While many changes have gone into improving the quality of performance space for students and faculty, Lee said special care was given to maintaining the historical architecture by including preservation experts in the planning.

Ogden said the Messer Construction crew should be finished up on the building by December, but officials will not open it to the public until June while the audio visual systems are tested.

Lee said a grand production will be planned for the opening.

"What people have to look forward to is the grandeur of Van Meter Auditorium," Lee said.

Across the top of the Hill, science faculty is preparing to move into the new Snell Hall building in its 95 percent completion phase.

Ben Johnson, WKU's project manager for Snell Hall, said the building should be completed in June after the final paint dries. It will open a year ahead of its originally projected completion date.

The building sits on the site where the former Snell Hall was located before demolition in 2005. Blaine Ferrell, dean of the Ogden College of Science & Engineering, said the new Snell will be completely made up of classrooms and much-needed laboratory space to replace the current ones used in Thompson Complex North Wing.

Physics, computer science, biology and chemistry classes will take place in 15 laboratories, two large lecture rooms and classrooms in the new Snell.

With the ceilings being too low and classrooms too small to add adequate vents for experiments in the Thompson building, Ferrell said the new building was imperative.

"Having a nice classroom, the atmosphere is better, the equipment is better, the education is better," Ferrell said. "The updates really generate enthusiasm for learning."

Faculty will be playing "musical offices" for a while as other phases of renovation are completed in the Thompson Complex Central Wing.

Ferrell said once construction is completed on the Science and Technology Hall in January, the math department will move there from the central wing sometime in spring 2010.

Once the central wing undergoes renovation, professors in the biology, chemistry, physics and computer sciences will uproot from the north wing to the central wing.

Eventually, the north wing may be demolished to make room for a new office building for the United States Department of Agriculture to house research and offices, Ferrell said. But the university is about \$16 million away from achieving that goal, Ferrell said.

The new Snell Hall also was designed to connect by bridge to the university's Engineering Biological Sciences Building, opened spring 2005. Two windows face each other from the buildings as officials wait for funding to complete the walkway.

Ferrell said the building will be a way to recruit new students to WKU while also providing a place to house its historical significance. A case was designed into the building to exhibit the college's memorabilia – including the will from the Ogden College's founder, Robert W. Ogden. The "wealthy farmer and businessman bequeathed the bulk of his estate for the establishment of an endowed school in Bowling Green," according to the Kentucky Library & Museum.

Ferrell said Snell was designed by faculty who saw a greater need for new classroom and laboratory space.

"They chose to make classrooms and designed labs instead of offices to be more modern and up to date," Ferrell said.